

Never deal with the fae wildlings. That's what they'd always told her, growing up.

Still, as with many other youths, being prohibited from something without being given a detailed reason simply urged a rebellious streak within them. The young bat, Meena, had been repeatedly stopped from entering the forest by locals, yet they couldn't keep her out forever.

Deep within the woods she found an odd, perfect ring of mushrooms. Story books and gossip in the town had told her that these were the ways into the fae realms and all their perils.

The girl had dismissed the stories as fancy, things to tell her what to do without having any actual reason and so she'd hopped inside.

The forest around her was suddenly crowded, misty and twisting, the poor thing ended up lost, alone and scared, learning first hand that some of the stories were very real.

She'd walked for what felt like hours, totally helpless, hearing laughter just out of reach as she got more and more scared, seeing lights dancing as if trying to lure her away. When she'd fallen to her knees, wailing and crying for help, a tall green cat had walked out of the mists.

"There, there, little one. Why do you cry?" She asked, though rather than the soft fuzz of other felines, her coat had a sheen and a floral scent, as though it were grass instead of fur.

"I-I'm lost. I can't get out. I wanna g-go hooome." Meena had whined.

"Will you give me your name?" The cat said, reaching a hand out, helping the girl stand.

"My name?" Something in the back of Meena's scared mind told her she shouldn't, some half remembered snatch of the tales. "Who are you? Please, can you help me, I just want to go home."

"You can call me Sprianita." The cat said. "I know these woods well, if it is your wish then say it. You wish you could go home."

The bat was scared of it all but still, that didn't set off any alarms. "I wish I could go home, Sprianita." She said.

Sprianita smiled softly before walking, holding her hand. The mists grew thicker around then and suddenly Meena was back in the mushroom circle, alone once more. A small object sat beside her, like a cat's paw made out of bent grass. She pocketed it as proof and ran home. Yet for all the hours she was missing, the sun was exactly where it had been, no one had even noticed her trip had taken place.

Meena interpreted every one of the fae stories differently from that point on, tales told to keep people away not for their safety but so that the story tellers could keep their power. She

never forgot the name Sprianita, clutching the amulet to herself in times of trouble and feeling a comforting presence from it.

When life got too much for her -at least to an impulsive rebellious teen- she had run into the woods again, confiding in the cat, yet still never giving her name, only to be led out once more.

Meena took up ballet, being trained well, striving to be the top of her class yet always falling short. The other girls in the class would tease and mock her, sending her crying to the lockers where she'd rock herself to comfort, clutching the grassy paw. She travelled far abroad, but she always felt their judgement. She was the weakest member of the troupe, just barely good enough to stay attached. Away from home, the grass amulet was her connection to her roots and the one figure she'd confided in.

After another performance where she'd almost messed up her routine live on stage, due to trying to kick higher than she could, her troupe had once again closed ranks and made her feel embarrassed and humiliated, as though she didn't belong. The instructor was the only one who seemed to want to keep her, to the point he wouldn't let her discuss the topic of leaving.

She'd stormed out, hiding in the changing room while the rest of the cast retired for refreshments.

"I hate them, I hate them all." Meena whispered to the amulet. "Even M. Monet, why won't he let me quit!?" She sobbed, on the verge of tears. "Oh, Sprianita, I wish... I wish I was better than them all, that I was the perfect one..."

A sudden herb-like aroma filled the room around her, interrupting her tears, making her gaze in surprise. She didn't know what had happened until she was called back for a rehearsal. Her old ballet shoes were gone, replaced with a new pair with a strange green, grassy lining within.

Her fae godmother still protected her, even here.

Whether it was confidence from the prayer or truly something in the new shoes, Meena's performance changed drastically. Her troupe went from teasing to jealous outrage, especially as her instructor made her the star of the show.

Ballet became her life, and in the following years she became renowned throughout the nation. The only downside for her was that the lifestyle kept her from home, from her friends and family.

Still, she enjoyed the success, the spotlight, the love and attention. Graduating from that troupe and becoming a celebrity in truth.

She kept that amulet with her always, whispering promises that she'd return to thank her saviour personally. It was years before she got the chance and once again returned to her parents house, now a woman grown.

Her previous meetings with the fae cat was something she kept to herself, as too did she hold the tale of her prayers inside. A small token of lingering spite for the figures who meant well yet still tried to keep her from the key to her dreams. Still after parting amicably, saying her farewells and that she was headed back abroad, Meena instead went in the opposite direction; Toward the fae woods.

The forest was as she remembered it, as if frozen in time, with the cat's paw amulet clutched in her hand. She found the ring, stepped through with her eyes closed and took a deep breath of sweet aroma as she passed closer to where she had been lost and rescued all those years ago.

As she opened her eyes, she saw the cat in front of her already. Sprianita crossed to her, clutching her hands in her own. "Welcome home, my beautiful dancer."

"Sprianita..." She said wistfully and happily, the cat hadn't aged a day either, if anything the powerful woman that the fae cat had been now seemed to share Meena's age. It made sense if time moved differently here, than out there.

"I've loved watching you grow, overcoming hardships and benefitting from the wishes I have granted." The cat said. "Won't you stay? I've never shown you my home here. Have I? I think it is about time."

"I'd love to see it." Meena replied, letting the fae lead her. The twisted trees began to yield, fog rolling back. They arrived in an area strewn with bright plantlife, blooming flowers, colourful fruits and near it, a fairytale cottage. "You've done so much for me, whatever can I do to repay you?"

Sprianita turned and smiled, the most gentle, motherly and warm smile she'd beheld. "You never did give me your name." She replied.

Meena gasped. Hadn't she? It was simple manners... of all the things to never do. "Surely there's something more you want? I mean, that's simple."

"I'll take it." Sprianita said.

The bat shook her head in disbelief, all the generosity she'd received and she was being given it all for free. "Meena, my name is Meena." She said.

"Meena..." Sprianita repeated, thinking for a moment and looking down. "I see you are still wearing my gift. Come, stand by me right over here."

“Oh, am I? Yikes, I thought I’d put on my hiking boots.” Meena said as she noticed the ballet shoes on her feet. She stepped where she was directed, looking up at the fae cat expectantly.

Sprianita waved her hand and arm, summoning up enchantment and throwing it in a cloud of glittering pollen. “Those shoes have served well but they need an adjustment, Meena.” The faerie said, each repetition of the name seeming to make something quiver within the bat, not that she remembered why. There was an itch at her heels and then a brushing as the shoes changed!

The delicate cloth outside split, revealing the grassy green which wrapped over her foot and heel, shooting a thorny spike to the ground from below the heel, raising her up to the arch of her foot. The green twisted and shook, spiralling up her shins, over the knee, up to the thigh. “S-Sprianita? Aren’t those a bit long?” She asked, there’s no way she could dance like before in those, could she? And if she could it would certainly add to her fame. The selfish thoughts kept her from concern as the thorn thickened and grew, pushing until she was standing en pointe. The ballet shoes turned to ballet boots that refused to let her feet back down.

“You were such a perfect dancer, and now you will make for such a perfect slave.” Sprianita said, still in that wonderfully warm and motherly tone, stepping to embrace the bat in a long lasting hug. “I’ll have to make up for lost time, of course. But you can wait for me as I waited for you, yes?”

Meena’s face shifted, had she heard those words right? No, surely not. “Oh, I really must be going back to the troupe before long, but I can spend the night here with you.” She conceded.

“No, stand to attention Meena.” She said, whispering in her ear without parting. The third use of her name sent a definite shiver down the bat’s spine as unbidden, her feet stomped together and her body went rigid, standing attentively as commanded without her even trying.

“W-what? What’s going on?!” The bat said, fearful as she tried to move and strain with her legs, yet she couldn’t even shift the parts that weren’t being hugged.

The grassy cat separated from the bat, her hand drifting to her chin. “Thank you for your name.” The fae said as another enchanting wave flickered around, a whooshing wind kicked grass, leaves and pollen up into the air, making Meena blink, when the screen cleared she saw herself?! A nearly perfect body double smiled back at her. Her clothing, her hair, her fur, all of it was mimicked except for this double having grassy green irises and the grass cat’s paw, now worn as a necklace.

“Wait right here until I return. Don’t move from this spot.” Sprianita said in her voice. The glamourised cat stepped away, retracing her steps, walking up the path to the outside world.

“Sprianita?! W-wait! Wait, come back!” She said her mind in a panic as she thought back, feeling the same fear from her childhood. The words came back to her. “I wish I could go home, Sprianita!” She demanded.

The cat stopped and turned slowly. Gesturing to herself. “Wish granted.” Before she vanished. The fake Meena sent out beyond this other realm.

As the real bat was left alone, the memories of the stories came back to her. The reminder to never deal with fae wildlings. As she struggled and strained against her own immobile body, she started to feel that worry once more.

Somehow, from half recollected fragments, she knew she wouldn’t be left alone forever. Sprianita had called her slave, and when the cat inevitably returned, she would see exactly what that entailed...